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ABSTRACT

Current histories of adult education trace it back to the early part of the 20th century. They share several assumptions: (1) "modern" adult education started early in this century; (2) antecedents go back to early European colonization of North America--but ignore Spanish colonizers; (3) the movement is exclusively Eurocentric, seeing no influence from thousands of years of adult education practices in Asia or Africa; (4) the movement is exclusively male; and (5) adult education is "modern"--human beings have gone from savage to civilized in a slow process of evolution. Adult education needs to become "postmodern," claiming a vast historical terrain in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, honoring egalitarianism, community empowerment, cultural and linguistic diversity, and multiple approaches to knowing. Educational history, like all knowledge, cannot be observed neutrally; to observe it is to change it because the observer's beliefs influence the observation. Today, the adult education movement is at a crossroads in the United States. It will mean rethinking about definitions, purposes, and ends/means. The result will be a brighter path to the future and a clearer story of the past. (Contains 13 references.) (KC)

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A PROPOSED HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ADULT EDUCATION

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> Those who think about adult education or lifelong learning are, by nature, planners of the future, not surveyors of the past. In their view, education tends to be concerned with needs and aspirations; with imperfections and inadequacies in people, institutions, and communities; and with how life can be made better by learning.
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> (Houle 1992, p.35)

In this paper I briefly detail the assumptions that underlie existing histories of the "adult education movenemt" in the United States. I explain my claims that the "modern" adult education movement is fundamentally post modern while its historians and many practitioners operate from within a modern perspective. I conclude by citing a need to move all educational historiography, including that of adult education, from a modern (Newtonian) to a post modern (quantum physics) basis.

Background

Recently I sat with faculty colleagues interviewing applicants for admission to our university's adult education doctoral program. A professor asked one interviewee to name someinfluential early adult educators whose writings coul be read with profit. After nervous hesitation, the aspirant named Aristotle. Faculty members exchanged smiles at the naming of an ancient Greek as an important adult educator. (The committee recommended admission despite this uninformed answer.)

Most U.S., Canadian, and British university programs of adult education have taught their graduates that 1919 introduced "the era of modern adult education"(Cotton 1968, p.1). This was the year that the Adult Education Committee of the British Ministry of Reconstruction issued a document that is still known simply as the 1919 Report. It claimed that "universal" and "lifelong" education had become permanent national necessities. Using the 1919 Report as his platform, Oliver Hugh Stanley (1923) depicted adult education as The Way Out of poverty materialism, and bankrupt pseudo democracy.

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With a heightened sense of crisis following the "great war," intellectuals in the United States took the Carnegie Corporation's challenge to form an organization that would elaborate and further the goals of adult education. Following "discussion forums" in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago, the American Association of Adult Education came into being in March 1926(Knowles, 1977, pp.190-92). This is the date that most U.S. adult educators cite as the official beginning of their field.

Current situation

There are only three book length histories of U.S. adult education, all from thirty to fifty years old. In 1944 noted historian James Truslow Adams published Frontiers of American Democracy; A Study of Adult Education in the United States. A decade later(1955), C. Hartley Grattan wrote In Quest of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Adult Education. In 1966 Malcolm Knowles produced The Adult Education Movement in the U.S., reissued with an additional chapter in 1977. Most regard it as the most comprehensive treatement available.

There is, of course, a much larger body of historical literature than these three books. Webster Cotton's(1968) On Behalf of Adult Education: A Historical Examination of the Supporting Literature was influential, as is Harold Stubblefield's(1988) Towards a History of Adult Education in America. And there are many monographs on specialized aspects of adult education.

A substantial number of historically grounded doctoral dissertations have come out of Northern Illinois University in the last few years. Some of these have gone from dissertation to book stage, though they have not yet had a major impact on the field as a whole. For example, Fred Schied(1993) wrote in his award winning Learning in Social Context:Workers and Adult Education in Nineteenth Century Chicago that "dominant adult education historiography has given us a censored version of our own past"(p.xii). Norma Salazar in Foolish Men: Sor Juana In s de la Cruz as Spiritual Protagonist, Educational Prism, and Symbol for Women(1994) issued a call for U.S. and Canadian historians of adult education to include Spanish language sources in their work. All of the recognized U.S. histories of adult education are Anglocentric. Except for a few dissertations at Northern Illinois University, most research in U.S. adult education remains ahistorical. As the Houle extract at the beginning of this paper suggests, adult educators have had little interest in history. Perhaps this is, as Houle implies, because doing adult education work is more exciting than reading about it(Houle, 1992, p.3). I suspect that there is a more profound reason. This lies in the nature of the historical enterprise itself.

Historiography

U.S. adult educators, including the authors of the "standard" histories cited above, have mistaken the activities of chroniclers for that of historians. (This is particularly ironic given the fact that Charles A. Beard, a premier American historian of his time, was one of the early presidents of the American Association of Adult Education. But then Beard never wrote the history of adult education.) Chroniclers list dates and supposed factual events. Historians, on the other hand, tell stories and explain their meanings (hi[gh]stories, the late Walter Prescott Webb,

professor of history at the University of Texas, liked to say). Histoty is not primarily about what happened. It is fundamentally about who we are or hope to be or fear we might be. History is always our story. Is has drama and meaning because it comes from deep within us.

A few months ago, around the dinner table of a Korean friend, I had this memorably illustrated. As the evening progressed, conversation turned to Korean history. The only non Korean, I asked what I thought was an innocent information question. Half a dozen Ph.D. scientists and engineers passionately explained the numerous errors in Japanese accounts of the origins of Korea, even though that had not been the thrust of my question. And they weren't talking about so called facts but rather about mythological stories of pre historic events. More than two hours after the initial question, one conferrer began to laugh at the incongruity between the content of the discourse and the intent of the question. Then everyone laughed and began profuse apologies for the avalanche of emotion directed to a stranger who hadn't even asked about what they clearly wanted to discuss. Of course Korean feelings are understandably strong because of Japanes domination during World War II and the moral dilemmas that are still present as a result. The point of the story is that history isn't just about what happened. It's about our current state of mind.

Why have adult educators in the United States settled for dry chronicles rather than passionate narrative? There is one overriding reason that finds expression in several components. It is that the loose coalition of (sometimes conflicting) interests that fit under the present umbrella of adult education fear that hostile forces will overwhelm them at the first sign of internal dissent. So if you're not sure who you are, better not confirm your doubts in public. The results are (1) lack of definition--there is no comprehensive, agreed upon definition of what adult education means; (2) conflicting purposes--Human Resource Development coexists uncomfortably with Critical pedagogy, and (3) confusion of ends and means--professors of adult education critique the schooled society from sinecured chairs in schools of education.

Existing chronicles of adult education as a "movement" acknowledge but do not confront these issues. A presumption of shared goals has been a tenous glue holding together a "field" whose individual members hold deeply conflicting values. The most recent Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education contains numerous essays illustrating these and other internal tensions (Merriam and Cunningham, 1989).

Current histories of U.S. adult education share several assumptions: 1) All assume that "modern" adult education started in the early part of the twentieth century. 2) All specify antecedents that go back to the early European colonization of North America, though they completely exclude Spain's activities (even though Spanish colonizers were first and most successful and used adult education techniques more extensively than did the English). 3) All are Eurocentric, seeing no influence from thousands of years of adult education practices by First Nation peoples or thousands of years of African adult education practices brought by(forced) immigration from that continent. 4) None see any influence from thousands of years of adult education parctices brought by immigrants from numerous Asian regions. 5) Their operating premises are not only White and Anglo but also exclusively male. 6) Finally, all assume that adult education is "modern," and each author understands history from a "modern" perspective. That is,

human beings have gone from savage to civilized in a slow process of evolution. Only in this century has enough general intelligence developed so that an organized movenent called adult education could emerge. If funding sources maintain and expand current programs, everyone can soon expect contentment as life long learners.

The critique of postmodernity

The term "modern" has two general uses. In everyday language, is means up to date or current. When applied to history, it generally refers to the constellation of beliefs and attitudes associated with the European and American Enlightenment: centralized planning, mass schooling, sophisticated technology, gradual improvement through human rationality and scientific(objective) research, and colonization of "underdeveloped" regions and people by "developed" nation states. Both Marxism and capitalism are modern constructs. Philosophically, realism (reality is mateial and inddpendent of our perceptions) and pragmatism (the realists are probably correct but life's brevity makes knowing impossible) furnish the ontological underpinnings of modernity.

On the other hand, "postmodernity" generally means a reaction against some or all of modernism. "Postmodernism replaces modernism's utopian faith in technology and planning with an ironic, self-mocking, and somewhat detached attitude toward culture and progress," writes Herbert Kohl(1992, p.119). "Postmodern culture is eclectic: it picks and chooses from the creative expressions of the world's peoples. . . . It is sensitive to the biases of Eurocentrism and considers them ironically and without the excessive posturing and boasting that was common during periods of European colonial expansion. It is . . .an attempt . . . to question the primacy of European canons and reposition Europe and the United States in a more modest and egalitarian world context. It mocks linearity, rationality, and the idea that technology produces progress" (Kohl, 1992, p.120).

Given this delineation, adult educators face a choice, They can continue to recite their modern roots--and there are many of these specified by the traditional authors. Or they can choose to see those aspects that are both pre and postmodern. This would mean claiming a vast historical terrain in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, and it would mean emphasizing those aspects of the movement that honor egalitarianism, community empowerment, cultural and linguistic diversity, and multiple approaches to knowing. The adult education critiques of modern schooling (including universities) is fully consistent with a postmodern view. Philosophically, it means moving away from the ontologies and epistemologies of scientific realism and pragmatism through phenomenology towards idealism. It means saying goodnight to Isaac Newton and good morning to Albert Einstein.

The Message of Quantum Physics

Of course, those schooled in modern forms of thought will object that history is simply a record of what happened, that we have no choice but to honor "the facts." This is exactly what natural scientists thought for three centuries. One of the central propositions of modernity was that of the "neutral" or "objective" observer. In 1927, just after the American Association of Adult Education formed, a prestigious assembly of physicists gathered in Berkeley, California. The

concluded that it is not possible to make a model of reality that explains how things really work behind the scenes. They gave up on the possibility of neutral observers and objective reality.

One of the startling conclusions of quantum physics is that there is no such thing as an observation that is independent of the observer or of what is observed, To observe something is to change it. And its relationship to everything else therefore changes as well. To borrow an expression from University of London physicist David Bohm, at the most fundamental levels everything is connected to everything in an unbroken way that he calls "that-which-is"(Zukav, 1980, p.306). There is no way for us to know what that-which-is would have been without our observation. Also, we cannot know everything about anything. The more precisely, for example, we know the position (location) of a subatomic particle, the less we can know of its velocity. The more exactly we know its velocity, the less we know of its position. So quantum physicists don't talk about something moving from point A to point B. They speak only of a measurement of it at point A and a measurement at point B.

The same is true in history. We have only a few "measurements"(observations) at selected points. We fill in the vast spaces between through a process that artists know as "closure." This is what makes motion pictures (a series of still photographs observed in a relatively quick sequence) appear to move. It is what makes a recognizable image out of a series of disconnected dots. Actually we fill in spaces from our own experience and belief systems. Of course doing history, just as doing physics, means following agreed upon rules. We gather some "facts." Then we fill the vast territories between these pin points out of our beliefs, experiences, and values. All of the meaning comes from us.

"Reality is what we take to be true", writes scientific historian Gary Zukav (1980, p. 310). "What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends upon what we look for. What we look for depends upon that we think", he continues. "What we think depends upon that we perceive. What we perceive determines that we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality."

Conclusion

The histories of adult education of the earlier part of this century have taken the field as far as they can in the United States. It is time for hi[gh] story from new eyes. This means dropping the linearity of our current story. It means rethinking "progress" and its relationship to technology. It means going beyond one or two dimensional rationality. In short, it means turning from without to within in search of that-which-is. Colleagues in Korea have much to offer North American counterparts. Asian ways of knowing are closer to the insights of quantum physics than are modern Western approaches.

Adult education is at a cross roads in the United States. In the short run the easy path, and one that will appear seductive, is to stick with the old ways and the old knowledges. Many senior professors and practitioners may feel the strong pull of tradition. Confronting internal inconsistencies produces initial discomfort. Careers built on ego may feel jeopardized. Others,

appearing to be avant garde, may opt for the glamor of technology. For only US$900 one can attend "the first conference of its kind in the world" in Anaheim, California (June 19-20) to learn how to produce" real time virtual humans" (Virtual Humans, 1996). Still others are already rushing down the grassy slopes of multinational corporations as gurus of Human Resource Development.

I believe it is time for U.S. adult educators to step aside from the easy path and remember the idealism that marked their decisions to work with educating adults. This will mean thinking again about definitions, purposes, and ends/means. The result will be a brighter path to the future and a clearer story of the past. The legacy is much larger than the past eighty years. A new historiography will mean that we can say, as did our (east) Indian colleague P.C. Lal(Bordia, Kidd, and Draper, 1973, p.5), "adult education has existed...from very ancient days--from the time when the art of writing was yet unknown.... It is an admitted fact...that adult education is entirely in accord with the genius of the people."

"Reality is that we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends upon what we look for. What we look for depends upon what we think. What we think depends upon what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality" (Zukav, 1980, p.310)

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